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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 004325

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SUBJECT: EAP DAS ARVIZU DISCUSSES PRC TIES WITH NORTHEAST ASIA NEIGHBORS

Classified By: Acting Political Section Chief Ben Moeling. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

¶1. (C) ROK Deputy Chief of Mission Lee Hyun-ju told EAP DAS Alex Arvizu that China and the DPRK have a "traditional and neighborly" relationship, but observed that contact between Chinese and North Korean mid- and low-level military officers and officials is rare. The ROK Government has made repeated requests of the Chinese for information about Kim Jong Il's health but has been rebuffed by Beijing each time. Chinese and ROK contacts described the Sino-ROK relationship as "good" but noted that minor tensions caused by disagreements over history or shared cultural assets continue to crop up. A December 2007 survey naming South Korea as the country most disliked by Chinese people came as a surprise to the ROK Government. MFA Asia Department Japan Division Deputy Director Lu Guijin said that the Sino-Japanese relationship is developing in a positive direction but stressed that the two countries still need to enhance mutual trust. MFA Asia Department DPRK, ROK and Mongolia Division Director Chen Hai believes that a U.S.-China-Japan trilateral dialogue could play a "vital role" in the region and warrants further exploration, but warned that South Korea might be concerned about being excluded from this new grouping. Chen recommended that the Six-Party Talks focus on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula before tackling other issues such as North Korea's missile development and proliferation. End Summary.

¶2. (C) EAP Deputy Assistant Secretary Alex Arvizu met with MFA Asia Department Japan Division Deputy Director Lu Guijun, MFA Asia Department DPRK, ROK and Mongolia Division Director Chen Hai and ROK Embassy Deputy Chief of Mission Lee Hyun-ju to discuss China's relationships with the DPRK, ROK and Japan and recent developments in regional multilateral arrangements in a series of separate meetings on November 19.

Sino-DPRK Ties

¶3. (C) ROK Deputy Chief of Mission Lee Hyun-ju described the China-DPRK relationship as "traditional and neighborly." Lee noted that while Chinese and North Korean high-ranking officials maintain close ties, contact between Chinese and North Korean mid- and low-level military officers and officials is rare. Lee said that the ROK Government has made repeated requests to the Chinese for information about Kim Jong Il's health but has been rebuffed by Beijing each time. Lee jokingly speculated that China could not, as opposed to would not, share information about Kim because the PRC does not have access to reliable information, especially after numerous Chinese intelligence agents were expelled from North Korea "approximately five years ago." Chinese officials,

moreover, are under strict orders not to discuss North Korean affairs unless they have prepared and cleared guidance on the issue, Lee speculated.

¶4. (C) Separately, Lee cast doubt on media reports claiming to have access to sources with first-hand knowledge of Kim's health. According to Lee's assessment, it is unlikely that North Koreans, especially members of Kim's inner circle, would dare to pass sensitive details about the Dear Leader to foreigners. Lee believes, however, that there is information about Kim that provides indirect clues to his situation. He noted that Kim's customized rail car has been inactive for four months, that motorcades have been observed going to and from hospitals and that Kim's family members have made a number of unusual trips. These and other clues lead Lee to conclude that Kim "must have health problems," is probably physically incapacitated and unable to appear in public, but is still mentally alert.

Sino-ROK Ties: Some Tension, Positive Overall

¶5. (C) MFA Asia Department DPRK, ROK and Mongolia Division Director Chen Hai told DAS Arvizu that the overall trend of the PRC-ROK relationship is "good." He noted that there were several high-level exchanges in 2008, including ROK President Lee Myung Bak's visits to China in May and August and PRC President Hu Jintao's visit to South Korea in August. Nevertheless, said Chen, there is some "psychological friction" between the South Korean and Chinese peoples. Recent tensions, especially between PRC and ROK netizens as expressed in on-line chat rooms, "cannot be ignored," said

BEIJING 00004325 002 OF 003

Chen. He speculated that South Koreans might resent the fact that China is an emerging power while South Korea is "on a downward trend." Minor tensions caused by disagreements over history or culture will continue to crop up, but will not harm the overall bilateral relationship, Chen predicted. The PRC and ROK Governments are working to "guide" their citizens and media onto the "right track" and to change perceptions of South Koreans in China and vice versa, assured Chen.

¶6. (C) According to ROK DCM Lee, the fundamentals of the PRC-ROK relationship are "normal" and "look good." The volume of bilateral trade continues to rise and South Korea continues to have a trade surplus with China, its top trading partner. There are occasional disputes between Chinese and Korean bloggers over matters of "cultural ownership," he noted, but Lee characterized these clashes as "normal phenomena" between neighboring countries with shared "cultural assets" and links going back more than 3,000 years. Lee recounted how a disagreement over UNESCO's 2005 designation of the Gangneung Danoje Festival as uniquely part of South Korea's cultural heritage quickly turned into a conflict between ROK and Chinese bloggers in which Chinese netizens claimed that South Korea had "stolen" something important to China's heritage. These bloggers argued that the Gangneung Danoje Festival did not qualify for the UNESCO designation because it was derived from China's traditional Dragonboat Festival, said Lee. South Korean youth quickly responded online and the result was a nasty war of words between young people in both countries. Lee contended that Chinese netizens misunderstood the requirements for UNESCO listing.

Anti-Korean Sentiment on the Internet

¶7. (C) Lee also told DAS Arvizu that the ROK Government had been surprised by a December 2007 survey in the International Herald Leader (a newspaper published by China's official Xinhua News Agency) naming South Korea as the country most disliked by Chinese citizens. According to the poll, 40 percent of respondents expressed dislike for South Korea while 30 percent expressed similar sentiments about Japan.

DCM Lee explained that during the past year the ROK Embassy made several complaints to the PRC Information Office of the State Council about anti-Korean Internet postings and the above-mentioned poll. According to Lee, the Information Office provided "serious cooperation" and blocked or removed some particularly offensive anti-Korean Internet postings. Lee and his staff also believe that China is trying to restrict the ROK's cultural influence by limiting the number of South Korean television dramas broadcast on Chinese television. Two years ago, there were more than 20 South Korean television series and three Japanese series broadcast on Chinese television, he noted. Last year, China permitted more than ten Japanese dramas to be broadcast in China compared to fewer than ten from South Korea. Lee questioned whether these changes reflected actual changes in Chinese viewers' taste or were part of a decision by the PRC Government to advance China's "diplomatic agenda with Japan."

¶ 8. (C) Chinese nationalism was at an all-time high in 2008, said Lee. While the reception of ROK athletes during the Beijing Olympics was "not bad," he observed that Chinese spectators did not clap or welcome the ROK team as they marched onto the field during the Opening Ceremony. Chinese spectators also rooted for the Japanese team during a baseball game against South Korea, an incident which worried many foreign affairs analysts in the ROK media.

Sino-Japan Ties

¶ 9. (C) MFA Asia Department Japan Division Deputy Director Lu said that the Sino-Japanese relationship is "on a positive development trend" but stressed that the two countries still need to enhance mutual trust, strengthen bilateral cooperation on regional and global issues and improve public perceptions of Japan in China and vice versa. China will continue to encourage Japan to play an important role on the international stage, stated Lu.

China, Japan and the United States

¶ 10. (C) Lu attributed the overall positive trend and direction of the situation in Asia to good U.S.-China ties and an improved China-Japan relationship. He maintained that the "normalization and gradual development" of relationships

BEIJING 00004325 003 OF 003

among the United States, China and Japan would help resolve conflicts in the Asia Pacific region. Lu noted that the United States and China have diverse channels of communication (track 1, 1.5 and 2 dialogues; bilateral and multilateral fora and the Six-Party Talks) which help to promote understanding, increase transparency and enhance cooperation. Nonetheless, some Chinese scholars, said Lu, have expressed concerns about three fundamental issues: 1) whether a strengthened U.S.-Japan alliance is designed to target China; 2) whether there are plans for the United States, Japan and Australia to construct a security alliance to dominate the region; and 3) whether the common interests of the United States and China are strong enough to overcome areas of disagreement.

¶ 11. (C) Chen suggested that a U.S.-China-Japan trilateral mechanism could be another forum to exchange views. He suggested exploring this proposal further but warned that South Korea might be concerned about being excluded from this new grouping. Based on the solid foundation laid by President Bush, China is willing to continue its positive cooperation with the new U.S. administration on Northeast Asia policies, Chen emphasized.

Six-Party Talks

¶ 12. (C) The Six-Party Talks is a good mechanism, but might be

on its "last gasp," said ROK DCM Lee. He recommended that the new U.S. administration consider establishing the equivalent of Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO). Without "new energy," there is a danger that the Six-Party Talks process might wane, he added.

¶13. (C) Chen recommended that the Six-Party Talks be preserved to manage the DPRK nuclear crisis effectively. The Six-Party Talks should remain focused on denuclearization, but Chen suggested enhancing communication among key stakeholders to discuss other issues such as North Korea's missile development and proliferation. The Six-Party Talks could turn its attention to North Korea's economic development and the normalization of relations with other countries after denuclearization is achieved, stated Chen.

¶14. (U) DAS Arvizu has cleared this message.
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